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THE FAITH OF A MIDDLE-AGED MAN

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Chapter VIII. The Hope of Everlasting Life

We who have reached middle age can no longer conceal from ourselves that we have reached and passed the high tide of life's joys. The ebb has begun, and there will be no turning now until the end. Already we have begun to lose the things that give life its early color and delight. We are no longer so anxious for fresh joys as we are to keep those we have. But we cannot keep them. Life has so long meant to us a steady *crescendo* of powers and possessions that we are a little startled to reflect that in the very nature of the case it is likely to mean for many of us an equally steady *diminuendo* from now on. The future begins to look at times a little gray. This would not so much matter if our desires were fading in equal proportion; but the hunger for life is as strong in us as it ever was, or stronger. Is there anything to satisfy it, or must we steel ourselves to a gradual surrender of all we have and are?

What is the farthest reach of human life? Are we in sight of it already? What are its utmost powers of development? Have we seen all of growth that we shall ever see? The answer means either tragedy or inspiration for our daily life. Science cannot tell us. It can follow our body's career up to the last instant, but it has no instruments or powers of calculation so delicate as to follow our spirit one step beyond. Philosophy can only speculate, without assurance. And when the earth is actu-

ally slipping out from beneath one's feet, speculation affords poor standing-ground.

Only in Jesus Christ is there chance of an answer. Only by his spirit can we measure our spirit's capacity for life. The history of the human soul is written in him. And, as we know, he who believes in Jesus will rest in the quiet assurance of a life beyond the grave—not so much because of what Jesus taught, nor even because of the historical weight of evidence for his resurrection, but because of the whole weight and significance of his personality. We shall be interested in every concurrent and corroborative judgment from thoughtful men, from Socrates and Plato down to our own day. Always wistfully eager for more light, we shall give attention to what every latest philosopher has to say upon the subject, however depressing his lack of spiritual insight may be. But we shall neither rest on their support, nor be discouraged by their indecision.

As our solicitude about a future life grows keener, as the hope of it becomes gradually the central hope of all that is left us, we shall become even more critical of the ground of our faith. As Bossuet said, "The greatest aberration of the mind consists in believing a thing because it is desirable." We want no such aberration, even though it should be full of comfort. We want reasonable assurance. We cannot be satisfied with analogies or probabilities. We do not

ask for proof of what may not be proved, but we do ask for that intimate and satisfying ground of conviction that shall be unshakable. And this we find in Jesus Christ. If we believe in him, we cannot doubt that the day of the soul is not concluded here under the sun.

This is not because of the abundance of his teaching upon the subject. It is always a fresh surprise to run over the three Synoptists and see how Jesus was content to leave the subject of the future life almost completely in the shadow. If his teachings in the matter had been in any wise proportionate to the curiosity of his church, or if he had deemed its importance for human life to be anything like what his followers have supposed, the New Testament record would certainly have been very different from what it is. But apart from apocalyptic allusions to the Judgment Day, a single parable that makes use of the conventional Jewish imagery of Abraham's bosom, and the brief argument with the Sadducees regarding the resurrection, we are left almost without suggestion as to the nature of the spirit's existence after death.

This is not at all as we would have it. It is not even what we should expect to be the case. But it is the unmistakable and unyielding fact. The discourses of Jesus had to do with the homely and prosaic duties of men toward men, here and now on earth, with the great good fight of the Kingdom of God here amidst the alien conditions that we know so well, and with the life of faith and love toward God that is the fulfilling of the law. His whole soul went out toward the men and women who were fighting the same battle he was fighting, and his whole teaching

seems to have been absorbed with the ways and means of bringing this fight to a successful issue. And he did not count among these ways and means a fore-knowledge of the conditions of spirit life in another world.

Probably they transcended human language, as well as human understanding. But it would seem they were not much in his mind. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," and the reason that he did not speak of them was because he was more concerned with other things. As Jesus only spoke those words that were given him to speak, it more and more seems probable to this generation that the detailed knowledge of a world to come—as of the time of the last day—was not among the things revealed to him. "What is that to thee? Follow thou me," would have been his reply to those whose curiosity pressed him for an answer. He centered men's thoughts upon the infinite importance of the present hour—its duties, its rewards, its heavenly and eternal significance. He left the great hope shining clear, to light up every footstep of the way. None should ever pluck them out of their Father's hand. But of material for speculation or day-dreaming as to another existence he left them next to nothing.

In this we cannot but think that our own generation is nearer to his will than some of those that have gone before. Of course many in our day, as in all days, are like the rich fool of whom Jesus spoke, who was so engrossed with making a fortune that he utterly forgot to make a life. He was of the earth earthy. He needed to have the searchlight of his eternal destiny turned upon his daily

living. Not one of us but needs the stimulus of an eternal hope, in all our thinking and doing. But the average Christian of today is singularly unlike the so-called "heavenly minded man" of a few generations past. That saintly spirit, William Law, was typical of the best Christian thought of the time when he gave explicit direction, in his *Serious Call*, for a fixed daily time of meditation upon death and its issues. To "set one's affections upon things above" meant for him and his contemporaries that they should definitely detach their gaze from earthly or social considerations, and fasten it upon their personal lot in a yet unrevealed world to come. In proportion as they were able to do this they were heavenly minded and ripening for eternity.

Such a thought has somehow faded out of the religious experience of today, even with those whom age or infirmity might be supposed largely to have shut up to thoughts like these. It has been the good fortune of the writer to talk with many saintly men and women who were very near the other side, whose remaining interests in this world would seem almost too slight to hold their thoughts to earth. But with rare exceptions their thoughts were frankly engaged, not with heaven or its possibly near dawn upon their spirits, but with the same Kingdom of God on earth with whose welfare much of their life had been bound up. The last word of more than one soul in distress of deep waters has been,

I love thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of thine abode;
The church our dear Redeemer bought
With his own precious blood.

And, after all, is not this as our Lord would have it? This is a fighting world and we are called to a fighting career. The rest of heaven does not gradually replace the strain of the fight. Only as we lay down the worn body do we lay off the old armor of the finished campaign. And we need not distress ourselves if we are not as "other-worldly" as we once supposed we would be when life was two-thirds done. Our Lord was very busy about his Father's business almost up to his last day of living. His preparedness did not come from weeks of meditation about the hereafter, but from a single devotion to each day's call during that last crowded springtime. In this, as in all else, he was perfectly natural. If we, as his followers, live a life chiefly guided by his teachings, without straining or artificiality, it is likely to be shaped more and more by the ambition, "Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven"; and its other-worldliness will appear in its active love rather than in its holy imagination of unrevealed glories.

All this, however, is far from meaning either that interest in a possible immortality is dying out, or that a firm assurance of it is of little consequence to human life. The opposite is true. Never was the problem so vital a one as it is today, simply because life itself is more intense, more vital, more full of value, than it has ever been before; and as our valuation of life rises, so does our reluctance to see it end, half-satisfied, in death. To a stolid Chinese peasant, knowing few joys above the level of animal comfort, whose life has been grudging and difficult from birth to death, it may be of little consequence whether a wider future

awaits him. But just in proportion as life becomes rich and wonderful and crowded with possibilities of high attainment barely opening upon us in this brief hand's breadth of years, do we shrink from laying it down—like a thirsty man who has just raised the cup of water to his lips. No doubt there are some discouraged souls who would gladly put out the lamp of life and sink into an eternal sleep. But there are not many so crushed of spirit, even among the miserable; and in this good world of God there should be none at all. Assuredly there are none among those who have caught the vision that Jesus had, of the Kingdom of God and its eternal fellowship of love between God and men. To have seen life as Jesus saw it, majestic with issues of transcendent value, is to cling to it with a hope that refuses to be denied. And never has life been so majestically full of worth and promise as it is today.

Our generation hungers for immortality not only because life is more wonderful than it has been, but because, as human life becomes increasingly intense and complicated, we need the reaction of a faith in immortality upon every day of living. In dull and sluggish times, when every man at evening sat in quiet at his own tent door, it may well have been easier than now to trust placidly in the righteousness of Jehovah, as the God of all the earth. But in the feverish intellectual restlessness and social discontent of our day, always harassed by the insoluble problems of wrong and pain and

inequality, always beset with the temptation to cynicism or frivolity or despair, we need, as almost never before, the steady assurance of an infinite value and reach to human life, in which the resources of eternal love and righteousness shall have a chance to work out to completion what this brief chaotic strife of right with wrong can never bring to pass. Eternity was the scale on which Jesus worked out his earthly plan; and nothing but a like confidence in eternity gives one room to think after him his thoughts.

But whether or not we need the stimulus and comfort of such a hope, it is obvious that he who believes in Jesus will find this sublime anticipation blossoming in his heart. It is impossible to trust in him and in the worth of his spiritual insight, and yet suppose for a moment that he lived in a world of spiritual unrealities, and gave his life at last for an illusion. He was as sure that the grave was not the end of life for men, as he was that he himself was returning to the Father. He was never haunted by the fear that either Pharisee or Roman could put an end to his fellowship with the Father, by the simple expedient of crushing the life out of his body. The infinite values for the whole moral universe of his filial communion with God were not at the mercy of a bare bodkin. And with an equal clearness of vision he saw that his brethren also belonged to a household that is not of this earth only. So that for us who believe in Jesus, his convictions are manifestly decisive.

Chapter IX. The Unending Fellowship

We cannot rest content, however, with the mere assertion. What is it specifically in the personality and teaching of

Jesus that gives ground for this assurance, in the face of so many fears and questionings even by wisemen in our day?

It is well to give a moment's consideration to these fears, in passing. We must not allow ourselves to be too seriously concerned by them, as though they somehow furnished a body of contrary evidence. We who have tried to keep an open mind through thirty years of dogmatic intolerance, both theological and scientific, do well to remember that we may approach this question knowing that it is a clear field for spiritual evidence, in which science has no discouraging word to offer. We need have no apprehension of "doing violence to reason," as though the biological researches of our time had somehow cast reasonable doubt upon humanity's last and greatest hope.

There seems to be in many minds a suspicion that a firm trust in immortality has in some way become out of date, as though Haeckel and a few other dogmatists of like temper had proved it to be unworthy of a scientific mind. Professor Palmer of Harvard has well said, "Formerly most of the superstitions of the day sprang from religion. In our time they are more apt to come from cheap science, and often succeed in terrorizing the religious mind." It is only cheap or presumptuous science that could go so far beyond its data of fact as to affirm that the universe has no place for spiritual existences apart from a physical organism, and that the life of the soul must needs end with the life of the body. We can afford to dismiss such skeptical intolerance with the stern rebuke of so thoroughgoing an evolutionist as Professor Fiske, that it "affords perhaps the most colossal instance of baseless assumption that is known to the history of philosophy."

The most decisive and satisfying utterances of Jesus center about the personal relationship to himself of the disciples. The intimacy of fellowship and love that had begun between them was unlike all other human friendships, so far as we know them. It was not for a possible two years, within the familiar confines of Galilee and Judea, but was untrammeled by time or place. It would outwear the decay of the body, and would go on undisturbed under new and strange conditions of which they could form no conception. Their fortunes were bound up with him for more than a few years of painful contest against overwhelming odds. They were to see and share his glory as well as his humiliation.

They had little idea of what this meant; for their thoughts scarcely lifted above a purely Jewish setting. But we can see how Jesus was facing for them a shoreless future. And this future was to be theirs because they were his friends. "Because I live ye shall live also." They were to "inherit eternal life" because they had chosen to suffer hardness with him here; as, indeed, all those who should lose their life for his sake should find it. "Where I am," he said, "there shall also my servant be." And in that verse which has sunk so deep into the hearts of millions facing the deep waters, either for themselves or those they loved, he said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also."

We have no other satisfying title to immortality than this, which naturally carries little satisfaction to one who only believes in Jesus with large reservations.

We have become so used to the hopefulness of Christendom in the face of death, that we need to be even sharply reminded how little basis such optimism would have if the life and words of Jesus were to be eliminated from human knowledge. We should still, so far as we can see, be in that chill gloom of pagan fear which is reflected in the epitaphs on Greek and Roman tombs, in contrast with the strange triumphant hopefulness of the early Christian inscriptions in the Catacombs. At best, individuals among us would be standing where Socrates stood, clinging, in spite of popular derision, to the hope that the gods had use for us even when earthly days were done. But there was little warmth or color in such a faith, and, at best, it rested on the marvelous spiritual insight of the man himself, which he was pathetically unable to communicate to others. The later Jewish faith in a resurrection to a judgment had small power to commend itself to men of other races, as, indeed, it would have appeared to have little save the fact of a stubborn national hope to rest upon.

It is the influence of Jesus, often unrecognized, that has so largely tempered our modern attitude to the hereafter, and has so profoundly strengthened the moral and psychological arguments for a future life. And it is well for us to bring this fact forward into consciousness, both that we may be renewedly grateful to him for this hope of all hopes, and that we may better realize how the hope, after all, is grounded in a genuine fellowship with him. It is not to be cheaply had. A Christian heredity, or baptism into a state church, or a profession of faith, does not necessarily make it ours; but only,

in the ultimate testing, an honest heart-loyalty to him. For it is unmistakably on this that he rests his anticipations of eternal life for his disciples. The continuance of personal existence and moral responsibility is assumed by him for all men; but for the life which is life indeed, men are to share it only as they are united with him as branches with the vine.

Perhaps it is not so much on any specific words of Jesus that our faith rests, as on the whole effect and witness of his personality in its bearing on this problem. The personality of Jesus was developed in time and under our familiar human conditions; but through and through it was related to eternity. If there was no unseen yet abiding world of the spirit, in which he was a sharer even then, it was a pitiful mockery, a dismal enigma. If he was not a citizen of two worlds, in very deed and truth, he was merely a demented wanderer in the world which now is. Judged in the light of eternity, his life was intelligible, convincing, victorious; but if a Roman legionary was able to bring that perfect love and trust and hope to utter defeat and annihilation, then it was an incongruous and jarring discord in the moral world. It was harmonious only with eternity; each day of it vibrated with the impulse of an endless life. It took such hold on God that we simply cannot conceive that hold being summarily brought to nought by death.

And his followers' fortunes he bound up in the same bundle of life with himself. "As I am, so are ye in the world." Together they were citizens of an everlasting Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Father. The pantheistic hope of being

merged into the world-spirit at death, reabsorbed into the great ocean of being, would have been utterly without significance to him. He saw how clearly the supreme values of life were bound up with personal relations, and it was the power of this personal relationship that, both for him and the disciples, was to ransom them from the power of the grave. Love was the tie that was to hold him and them indissolubly to him who had made them for himself. And it was because he lived in love that he lived in the joyous assurance of eternity.

As to the nature of the life to come and the manner of our entrance into it, it is sometimes hard for us to be faithful to our own ignorance. We may have started out as children with very clear and satisfying ideas of heaven, based upon the beautiful imagery of the Revelation, in its description of the city with streets of gold and gates of single pearls. But from this childish simplicity of faith, so impossible for the mature mind, we are borne away, whether we will or no, into something that perhaps is not so near the truth as the naïve literalness of childhood.

Yet our experience could not be otherwise. Most thoughtful men come in time to recognize that there is no clearly defined biblical teaching on this subject, and that all efforts to compel from the Bible an explicit statement of the manner of our transition to the spiritual world, or the sequence and nature of the last things, are—and were divinely meant to be—vain and unconvincing. There are indeed explicit statements to be found, even in the New Testament; but the more these are pressed into matter-of-fact descriptions of literal occurrences,

the more do we recognize how utterly the reality transcends the limitations of such word pictures.

As has often been pointed out, the Bible has three distinct strata of belief and teaching as to the future life. The first, which comprehends most of the Old Testament, frankly denies it. The holy men of old, even among the chosen people, for the most part lived and died without this faith. As the Psalmist said, "In death there is no remembrance of Thee; in Sheol who shall give Thee thanks?" (Ps. 6:5). The dead had lost their hold on God, as they had lost their place on the pleasant earth. They could not longer know or praise his goodness. As another Psalmist wrote, "Wilt thou show wonders to the dead? Shall they that are deceased arise and praise thee? Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or thy faithfulness in Destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? And thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?" (Ps. 88:10-12). Even Hezekiah, in his bitter hunger for more days in the sunlight, cried out, "Sheol cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee; they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee" (Isa. 38:18-19). It was a desolate belief, and it cannot be wondered at that most people seem agreed to forget that it has any place in the Bible.

After the Exile, this was gradually replaced in Jewish thought by the less gloomy belief that the dead "slept in the dust of the earth," until the day when they should be summoned forth to judgment. Thus Ezekiel represents Jehovah as saying to the dry bones of his vision, "I will open your graves, and

cause you to come up out of your graves, O my people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezek. 37:12). This was the belief that had stiffened into dogma by our Lord's day, and was refused only by the sect of the Sadducees. Righteous and wicked alike, the dead were in their tombs, waiting the hour when they should be recalled to earth. It was the hereditary and rooted conviction of our Lord's disciples, and whatever allusions he may have made in their hearing to a resurrection had to be transmitted through the medium of their understanding, colored by these intense preconceptions. It is a view that is repeatedly suggested in the gospels, and even in the later writings of the New Testament.

There was a further unfolding of hope, however, that came with the teaching of Christ and with ripening Christian experience. This confidently counted upon an unbroken continuance of the personality and of its conscious fellowship with Jesus Christ, in spite of physical dissolution. The reawakening to conscious life was not put off to some far-distant day at the end of the age, but the new life dawned as the weary body was laid down. Thus Jesus said to the penitent thief, "This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." He spoke also of God as the God of the living, who still maintained fellowship with those who had walked with him on earth. Jesus himself even held converse with the living spirits of Moses and Elijah. He thought of heaven not as a place swept bare of all human fellowship by the sleep of the grave, but as the scene of the richer and deeper communion which he promised to his disciples in those many mansions.

He claimed that he was himself the resurrection and the life, so that he who lived and believed in him should never die. The influence of this teaching appears clearly in the later thought of Paul, to whom death meant the departing to be with Christ. To be absent from the body was to be at home with the Lord, which was very far better. "For we know," he said, "that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

This is the faith which more and more comes to be that of the thoughtful Christian experience, as it breaks away from bondage to the letter, and rests upon the teaching of Jesus: that God has made us for himself in a fellowship of love that is a joy to him, and that cannot be interrupted by the incident of physical death. He that hath the Son hath the life. And it is a life that can neither be drowned in the darkness of Sheol, as Hezekiah feared, nor held for ages sleeping in the tomb until the sound of an archangel's trumpet.

It is true we have not the light we would wish to have. Only at a few points does it seem to reach our need, and at none does it relieve our curiosity. Perhaps any consideration of the theme rouses more perplexities than it relieves, so utterly do these things lie outside our understanding. Questions rise to our lips to die away unanswered. What are we to do, e.g., with all that portentous apocalyptic imagery of the Last Day—"Day of wrath, that dreadful day, when the heavens shall pass away"—when at the trumpet blast, every soul of man shall be gathered for the Great Assize, to

be judged out of the things written in a book? What of the coming with clouds, and the gathering of uncounted millions in the air, and the busy angels garnering the harvest, and all the cataclysmic overturnings of those days of doom?

Let him answer with assurance who thinks he knows where the pictorial element in those ancient prophetic imaginings leaves off, and where the underlying spiritual reality begins. Surely, nowhere would we walk with more humility and reverence for the sacred word than in the presence of these mysteries that so far outrun our power to think or see or understand. But we must not forget that our faithfulness to the Bible is not proportioned to the literalness with which we construe its letter, so much as to the sympathy and moral insight with which we interpret its spirit. Even in the lifetime of Paul the apostle, we can see his attitude changing toward the problems of the future life. And many generations of humble reverent seekers for the truth have come and gone since then, clarifying our vision of the laws of the spiritual life, in life and death. And so profoundly have we come to feel the silent inevitableness of God's rewards and punishments in character, the inseparable consequences of sin and holiness, of love and hate, that the ancient Jewish conception of a distant day of formal awards, with all its setting of a material universe convulsed with the terror of that crisis, seems to many to belong to the pictorial stage of education, in the childhood of moral development. The truth and the awe of it all are with us still, but clothed in different forms, that reach home to the understanding of the present day. And clear,

outstanding, high above all veiling metaphors, is the hope of endless life for those who take refuge in God. "He that doeth the will of God abideth forever."

With this hope we are content. Death is the gate of life. Our loved ones are not sleeping in the grave; rather do they stand "all rapture through and through," serving God in his presence. Amid the infinite activities of that spiritual world, passionately alive, as God is alive, to the needs of this stricken earth, we believe that our Father has other uses for them than to leave their spirits, trained and tempered to his holy uses, in silent sleep while the crowded millenniums of the struggle for the Kingdom wear heavily on for lack of helpers. Rather have they gone up to the help of the Lord against the mighty. Amid the boundless multitudes of those who have gone out into the other world untaught, untrained, undeveloped—like the hosts of little children on whom infinite labors of love must yet be spent—there is place enough for every redeemed life, chastened and made sweet and wise by earth's discipline, to find needy and joyous avenues of service, even in the heavenly city. It is thus that we interpret our Lord's parable of the good servant, found faithful in a few things and made ruler over many things. The reward of that servant, entering into the joy of his Lord, was to bend his shoulder to new and heavier burdens—glorious burdens, that angels might wish to carry, in that new-found heavenly strength.

This is the well-grounded hope that is cheering the heart today of many a man and woman, laid helplessly aside from any share in the great work of the Kingdom here below, and waiting, through

weary useless years of pain and weariness, for another chance to feel the keen delight of uttermost activity in the forefront of need. Theirs is, with Stevenson, the "dingy battlefield of the bed and physic bottle." But they will hear the bugle call again! No fear! Because their Lord lives, they shall live also; and as his life is the very energy of love, so shall they presently find their place in that blessed ministry of service at his side.

This, then, is the outlook upon life that belongs to those who believe in Jesus—an outlook immensely wide and satisfying, full of dignity and promise. Our immediate present may be choked with care, and barred irrevocably from any free advance to new possessions. But our future is unbounded, and our capacity for life has hardly yet been drawn upon. Our horizon is as broad as the mercies of God, and when evening has really come, we shall know that the greater day of life is just about to dawn.

Here on the open desert where these words are written, the world in which we live is wonderful for its spaciousness. The dawn breaks every morning on a far straight horizon, as of the ocean. The sun rolls up, a disc of molten gold, above the desert rim. All day it moves amid the great silent spaces of the sky, with neither smoke nor cloud to dim its grandeur. And when night falls, the constellations go wheeling through the

heavens, in the same solemn splendor as once before the eyes of Job, until they set behind the mountain wall. The silence, the spaciousness, the endless wonder of this illimitable pageantry, bring rest and comfort to the soul. The very memory of the restlessness of great cities is faint and far away.

It is somewhat so that life lies open to him who believes in Jesus. It is majestic in its amplitude. To multitudes it is close and feverish and full of disappointment. Even its rosy promises are but illusion, that quickly passes leaving one embittered with the tantalization of its mocking beauty. But our hunger for life, to its very last thrill of eager longing, is a true promise of the satisfaction that shall be. He that wrought us for this very thing is God. Our Lord came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Even if we are past the meridian, we have hardly yet begun to taste how good the waters of life are. The best is yet to be. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love him."

And so, setting ourselves in quiet confidence to the task of each new day, we also say by faith, with that hard-pressed comrade in the good fight, "Thanks be unto God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."